

PSYCHOLOGISTS FOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Immigration Reform, Yes -- Scapegoating and Racial Profiling, No

The immigration debate in the United States has been reawakened by Arizona's passage of SB 1070, the new state law that allows enforcement officers with "reasonable suspicion" to demand proof of legal residency. While Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) recognizes that immigration policy is a complex arena in which multiple alternatives deserve careful consideration, we believe any law that increases the likelihood of racial profiling and sudden mass deportations jeopardizes core foundations of community life, civil liberties, and justice itself.

From a psychological perspective, SB 1070 is particularly troubling because it promotes destructive, fear-driven tendencies to scapegoat, dehumanize, and exploit those who are deemed outsiders. It makes all Latinos, including U.S. citizens of Hispanic backgrounds, more likely victims of racist stereotyping, unequal treatment, and open derision. As a result, the combination of trust and respect necessary for inter-ethnic and multi-cultural communities to flourish is undermined.

Moreover, important realities are overlooked when an "us" versus "them" mentality takes hold. In this case, undocumented immigrants from Mexico are routinely blamed for unemployment and for placing an undue burden on schools, health-care facilities, and other social services. In fact, most undocumented immigrants have income taxes withheld from their paychecks; they pay into social security but are unlikely to claim any benefits; and they are restricted by law from accessing a range of other benefits including food stamps, Medicaid, and public housing programs.

Although supporters of SB 1070 argue that the law does not allow racial profiling, such patterns are already evident in policing across the nation, despite departmental policies prohibiting its use. This suggests that, regardless of how the law is worded, it will increase the likelihood that Arizona police officers will view those who are "Latino-looking" with suspicion. While some undocumented persons will be discovered and deported, a much greater number of individuals--many of whom are U.S. citizens--are likely to be inconvenienced, humiliated, and harassed. In short, the adverse impact of this enforcement escalation will be far-reaching. The harmful effects will be experienced by parents and children who, while being further marginalized in their communities and schools, will be subjected to heightened levels of anxiety, depression, and other forms of psychological distress due to understandable fears of sudden joblessness, deportation, and family separation.

Another deep psychological cost of laws such as SB 1070 is that they can blind us to the human rights of our neighbors in the present era of massive forced migration. In this way, Arizona's new law ignores important realities regarding the role that the U.S. has played in the suffering that prompts undocumented Mexican immigrants to cross the border. A longer view of history focuses attention upon the U.S. seizure of Mexican lands; the violent intimidation of Mexicans caught in the U.S. when the U.S. moved its border south; the

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lynching of Mexicans in the Southwest to terrorize remaining Mexicans to move south; the exploitation of Mexican workers through the Bracero Program; the separation of families; and the reduction of Mexican migrants from their human value to their labor use value for securing high profits with low wages.

In more recent years, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) has flooded the Mexican market with corn subsidized by the U.S. government, undercutting the price of Mexican corn and forcing hundreds of thousands of small farmers out of business. The U.S. appetite for drugs and U.S. drug policy have contributed to ruthless and intimidating violence, particularly south of the border. The U.S. export of firearms to Mexico has helped create regions where atrocities are committed daily, and where bystanders are at mortal risk from the stray bullets of army and drug cartels. Clearly, the government of Mexico also bears substantial blame for these dire circumstances.

PsySR believes that just and effective long-term immigration policies need to address the psychological, political, and economic issues described here, duly recognizing the daunting nature of immigrants' experiences and challenges, as well as their contributions to our communities. Undocumented immigrants from Mexico most often leave their homes to gain some measure of economic and physical security for themselves and their family. In so doing, they are confronted by a range of physical and psychological adversities. They endure the pernicious effects of poverty and inequality; inadequacy of education; and separation from family members, friends, and the places where they were born and raised. They struggle with fear and anxiety surrounding a perilous crossing of national border(s), including exploitation and violence. They often face inadequate housing and healthcare. They cannot protest unjust and dangerous workplace practices for fear of firing and deportation. The risk of separation from family members through deportation always looms. Yet undocumented immigrants provide much needed labor, especially in the agricultural and service industries, and their spending fuels local economic growth.

In sum, holding undocumented immigrants exclusively responsible for a complex situation to which many parties have contributed poses a regrettable obstacle to collective problem-solving, which is possible only when no group is demonized. Regardless of intent, partial and short-sighted "solutions" such as Arizona's SB 1070 carry the potential to contribute to a humanitarian disaster while undermining the United States' commitment as a democratic nation to human rights. Therefore, Psychologists for Social Responsibility strongly opposes this new law from both psychological and social justice perspectives. We call for its immediate reconsideration in order to address its profound shortcomings.

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Psychologists for Social Responsibility (PsySR) seeks to bring greater psychological knowledge and expertise to issues of peace, social justice, human rights, and ecological sustainability. For more information, please contact us at info@psysr.org.